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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: GOVERNMENT WINS BIG IN PROVINCIAL POLL

11. (SBU) Summary: President Mahinda Rajapaksa's ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) coalition delivered a resounding defeat to the opposition United National Party (UNP) in Western Provincial Council elections held Saturday, April 24. The two-thirds majority received represents the largest margin of victory in a Sri Lankan election since 1977. The UPFA's strategy to campaign for a vote of approval for the recent military successes against the LTTE clearly paid off. While central Colombo districts dominated by ethnic minorities voted for the opposition UNP, every other district in the province voted for the UPFA. Few problems were reported during the polling, with accusations of ballot box switching in one electorate, and only a few incidents of violence. However, one of the leading government candidates, Duminda Silva, was the apparent perpetrator in the fatal shooting of an 18-year old in a Colombo suburb as the ballot boxes were being transported to the counting center. Top government vote-getter Prasanna Ranatunga is expected to become the new Provincial Council Chief Minister. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Final result tallies showed President Rajapaksa's ruling UPFA coalition winning 64.7% of votes, giving the government alliance 68 of 104 seats in the Western Provincial Council. The opposition UNP received 29.6%, giving them just 30 seats. The Sinhalese chauvinist JVP received just 2.4% and 3 seats, reflecting the UPFA's ability to co-opt nationalist sentiment through its use of the military's battlefield successes as its major campaign theme.

13. (SBU) Election monitoring organizations reported little violence. However, in the Colombo suburb of Mt. Lavinia, an 18-year old boy was shot dead after a disturbance surrounding the collection of a ballot box from a polling location. There were numerous witnesses. One of these told Embassy personnel (and a newspaper account suggested) that the shooter was self-proclaimed Chief Ministerial candidate Duminda Silva of the UPFA. Some observers had projected that Silva would win the position of Chief Minister of the Western Province Council. However, returns on April 27 fortunately suggest Prasanna Ranatunga, not Silva, was the UPFA's top vote-getter and is in a better position to assert his claim to become the new Chief Minister.

14. (SBU) There were allegations of several ballot boxes being switched as they were transferred from polling locations to the counting center in the Kotte electorate in Colombo District. UNP MP Ravi Karunanayake told us that he had complained to the Commissioner of Elections. (Note: There are recent examples of the Elections

Commissioner using his power, in cases of obvious ballot tampering, to void the results in one area and require a re-vote. However, the discrepancy in this one precinct would hardly change the overall result.)

15. (SBU) Comment: These election results in the Western Province followed expectations of a crushing UPFA victory. The UPFA's campaign on the theme of the military's successes against the Tigers paid off handsomely. Pre-polling intimidation by thugs such as Silva helped suppress minority votes for opposition parties and held the UNP vote down. President Rajapaksa has emerged in a strengthened position within the UPFA, while the results are a further blow to Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe. These critical elections over, Rajapaksa could choose to take advantage of his reinforced mandate to demonstrate more flexibility in seeking an end to the conflict through UN auspices. It is probably too early to expect him to make significant conciliatory moves toward the country's embittered Tamil minority by offering an overall political solution, however.

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